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ABSTRACT

Each academic year, a growing number of students with basic deficiencies in skills that are mandatory for successfully achieving the benefits of higher education enter colleges and universities. This problem is not limited to minority and underprivileged populations; these students come from all walks of life, all levels of socioeconomic backgrounds, and all levels of ability. Active student recruitment by institutions or their departments may promote the problem, especially when students have previously benefited from the effects of grade inflation in high school. Many students are unprepared because they did not take the necessary college preparation courses, and some who are oriented toward a career will not be able to meet their goals unless assistance is provided. A survey was conducted of faculty members to determine their attitudes and opinions regarding the basic academic skill levels of undergraduates. Over half of the respondents felt that student competency in basic skills had decreased, the greatest losses being in the language arts. Many respondents blamed poor high school preparation. Slightly more than 74 percent felt that institutions of higher education should provide corrective services. While faculty members appeared to be very much concerned about the skill levels of undergraduates, most preferred to stay out of what they perceived to be the remedial aspects of education. However, many seemed willing to undergo inservice training and to use supplementary techniques and materials designed to assist the learning of students needing help. To correct the troubled transition from secondary to postsecondary education, closer working relations between the secondary schools and colleges is needed. (JD)

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The Basic Skills Levels of Undergraduate Students and Resultant Attitudes of a University Faculty

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The Basic Background of College Students. Since the 1950's the institutions of higher education in the United States have gone through a period of rapid expansion. Buoyed by the baby boom population, the GI Bill of Rights, the community college movement, the open door policy, an era of positive governmental support and an optimistic, if not prosperous, economic climate, the national college population increased substantially. During the period from the fall of 1969 until the fall of 1979 college enrollment grew 42% from 7,986,834 students to 11,669,429 students (Levine, 1980).

In 1979 the number of eighteen year olds in the population peaked at 4,292,000; the Census Bureau reports that since then, the age cohort has fallen by 3.4% (Magarrell, 1981 d). However, a survey conducted in the fall of 1980 for the Chronicle of Higher Education demonstrated that the number of freshmen was 3.6% greater than in the previous academic year. The National Center for Education Statistics estimated that college enrollment increased by 3.2% to a total 12,087,200 students.

A more recent survey (Magarrell, 1981 b) of 1,108 institutions indicates that the 1981 fall enrollment was at an all time high of 12.3 million even though the number of pupils in the traditional college age cohort decreased by 1.9% over the previous years. In part this growth is based on the economic uncertainty facing the nation.

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The current unexpected upward trend in enrollment provides postsecondary institutions with little breathing room. In a 1979 report, the Carnegie Council on Policy studies in Higher Education notes that over the next twenty years young people will be in high demand. Institutions of higher education will be faced with a steady decline in the population of traditional college aged youths (eighteen to twenty-four year olds) until a predicted low point in 1997. In fact, it is predicted that for every one hundred young people between the ages of sixteen and twenty-one years of age in 1980 there will be only seventy-four of them in the respective cohort in 1995. The nature of this population decline heralds greater importance since both private and governmental employment opportunities, and also educational opportunities will be readily available for those young people; hence, competition will exist between the world of work and institutions of higher education. In addition, by 1990 the armed services will have to recruit one out of three male high school graduates to maintain projected manpower requirements. It is clearly evident that many seats in colleges and universities will not be filled over the next twenty years. Yet the survival of many institutions depend on filling these seats with students of one type or another.

Institutions of higher education are for the most part aware of these demographic projections and have developed various plans of action. There is data which demonstrate that colleges are actively competing for bodies through recruitment activities (Colleges' Cutthroat..., 1981). A study by the College Board (Admissions

Testing Program, 1979) investigates the 1978 admissions figures of 1,463 institutions. Of 2.5 million applications filed in 1978, a total of 1.9 million or 83% were accepted. Since many students submit several application forms, it is probable that nearly every applicant was granted acceptance somewhere. Hence, students who may have been excluded from higher education for various reasons in the past are clearly being enrolled at this point.

The enrollment trends over the past twenty years have been based on both societal and academic factors. More nontraditional avenues to higher education exist today than ever before and more students from diverse social strata are seeking entrance to post-secondary institutions. Throughout the period between the mid 1960's and the 1970's there was an effort to provide more students with an opportunity to attend an institution of higher learning. The community college movement entered a rapid growth period such that during the 1967-1968 academic year alone, more than one community college was established each week. Furthermore, legislative action and judicial decisions formed the basis of a multipronged attack on racial discrimination and economic inequity; in part, the logistics called for equality through the educational process. Many liberal arts colleges and universities made a concerted effort to recruit minority students through regular and special admissions programs. Flexible admissions programs or open-door admissions policies were also adopted at many urban-centered institutions. A second generation GI Bill of Rights encouraged Vietnam era veterans to seek a college education.

The results of these actions were to forever alter the nature of higher education. In the past, high achievers from wealthy families were most likely to attend college. Since the latter 1960's, the nation's postsecondary student body has changed markedly. Through these newly opened doors entered students from groups traditionally underrepresented in higher education: minorities, women, sons and daughters of blue collar workers, young adults from low income families, disabled individuals, working adults, veterans, and senior citizens (Maxwell, 1979). The proportion of women rose from 28% in 1969 to 51% in 1979. The percentage of members of black and other races increased from 7% in 1969 to slightly over 13% ten years laters. The number of adults over the age of twenty-five grew from 28% in 1972 to 35% in 1977. Part-time students constituted 31% of the population in 1969 compared with 41% in 1979. At least 41% of the undergraduates attended some night classes and more than half of the population (54%) held jobs (Grant, 1978; Levine, 1980). Overall, the traditional college student cohort increased minimally when compared with the aforementioned groups. In some regions of the country the traditional college student group has become the minority group with regards to the size of the new population.

The Basic Skill Levels of College Students. As a result of the admissions policies of the 1950's and 1960's, nontraditional students were in many cases denied admissions to the more prestigious four year colleges and universities (Gordon, 1975; Kendrick, 1965). Thus these students enrolled in the rapidly expanding community

colleges which responded by establishing developmental education programs. Now nearly every institution, including the most prestigious, (Harvard, Stanford, University of California, etc.) have programs to assist students who encounter academic problems.

Until the mid 1970's it was automatically assumed that those without the prerequisite skills came from the nontradition student population. However, Roueche and Snow (1977) point out this is not the case.

> It is now apparent that the problem is not limited to minority and disprivileged or to working-class populations. It permeates the entire population. The students come from all walks of life, all levels of socioeconomic backgrounds, and all levels of ability. They enroll in postsecondary institutions of all types: large and small, public and private, open-door and highly selective. In fact, much of the adult basic literacy training in the nation today is being conducted by postsecondary institutions. (p. 5)

Each academic year a growing number of students enter colleges and universities with basic deficiencies in skills that are mandatory for successfully achieving the benefits of higher education. One major indicator of this is that from the 1940's to the mid 1960's, scores on standardized achievement tests rose steadily, but since that time these scores have declined, especially those in the verbal domain. For example, significant declines have been registered in

scores reported for the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), American College Testing Program (ACT), Preliminary Scholastic Aptitude Test (PSAT), Minnesota Scholastic Aptitude (MSAT), Iowa Tests of Basic Skills (ITBS), Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills (CTBS), and the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), among others (Harnischfeger & Wiley, 1975). Yet even with the recent halt of the downward spiral it can be said that the skills levels of today's students are lower than in years past. What then is the effect of the skills decline? Are the students prepared for the rigors of a college education?

The Academic Background Versus the Basic Skills Background. Clearly there are those who entered college without the prerequisite skills. Maxwell (1979, p. 23) believes that whether a student is properly prepared for higher education depends inpart on the particular nature of the institution, i.e. (1) the entrance requirements, (2) the expectations of the faculty, and (3) the characteristics of the average student. In addition, the foundations for success in different majors within the same institution will be built upon differences in pre-college academic preparation and skills attainment. Thus, the underprepared students have skills, knowledge, and academic ability which are significantly below those of the typical student in the institution or the curriculum in which they have enrolled. Active recruitment activities by institutions or their departments may even promote the problem especially when students have previously benefited from the effects of grade inflation at the high school level.

Besides the class of students described as underprepared, there is another set who are classified as misprepared students (Maxwell, 1979) because they did not take the necessary college preparatory courses required for success in their new institutions or their chosen majors. Mulka and Sheerin (1974) believe that the high school curriculum is the most critical of all variables that affect a young person's access and entrance to as well as personal achievement and persistence in institutions of higher education. One of the reasons given for the decline in SAT scores is that in the secondary schools there has been a decrease in required academic courses and a shift to popularized electives which do not contain adequate levels of academic content (Wirtz, et al., 1977). Whether or not the hypothesis is accurate, the problem is a very real one. The 1976 Carnegie Survey found that a large majority of students have not studied traditional high school courses:

35% have not taken a second year of algebra

78% have not taken even one year of foreign language

27% have not taken junior or senior English

22% have not taken geometry

20% have not taken a specific science.

Maxwell (1979) points out the problems to be faced by these underprepared and misprepared students when she states:

> Students cannot understand textbooks or lectures if they have not grasped the concepts, are unfamiliar with the technical vocabulary or lack the information

> necessary to interpret the examples and references. Similarly, students cannot write skillful essays or topics about which they know little. (p. 4)

Recently the Association of American Colleges (Jacobson, 1981), which represents over six hundred institutions of higher education, was urged by an ad hoc group of academic deans and other leaders of its member institutions to develop a definitive statement of what colleges should be able to expect of applicants for college admission. At the heart of this proposal and also the work of Project EQuality (1981) is an upgrading of the basic skills levels of students entering college. However, the definition of basic competency is debated.

Some administrators and faculty members in higher education refer to high school course work as the basic skills while others feel that the basic skills are the 3R's which should have been mastered in elementary and middle school; yet it goes without saying, basic literacy is paramount for college success. Mulka and Sheerin (1974) point out that "a lack of basic skills for successfully achieving the benefits of higher education is a far more critical barrier to educational opportunity than any other single factor (p. 145)." The very existence of basic skills programs throughout higher education would indicate that at least the incoming freshman possess weaknesses in some of the skills essential for college success (Grant & Hoeber, 1978). Carman and Adams (1972) echo this belief:

> Every student is engaged in a battle for survival. This battle is not simply a fight to gain intellectual

> food and shelter in the academic wilderness of courses and classes, rather it is for many an effort to endure. More than six out of every ten freshmen who enter American junior colleges, and universities never achieve their expressed academic goals. Countless more struggle through but fail to even approach their potential for success. Deficiencies in the basic learning skills - reading, writing, listening, remembering, note-taking, and test-taking--are at the heart of most of these failures. (p. vii)

Although there is substantive data which demonstrate that a decrease in the average high school seniors' ability to function in the verbal domain exists, it appears that the majority of students now believe that their ability levels are adequate for college success. Chandler (Note 1) reported that the Longitudinal Study of Educational Effects showed that 90% of high school seniors felt they needed more assistance in reading and mathematics to succeed in college. Since that time, the number of freshmen stating that they needed supplementary help for achieving college success has dropped drastically. The 1979 American Council of Education/University of California - Los Angeles survey of the American freshman found that 25% of the freshmen believed they required remedial help (i.e. English, 14%; reading, 8%; mathematics, 25%; social studies, 4%; science, 13%; and foreign languages, 14%). More recently the 1980 freshman survey (Magarrell, 1981 c) conducted by the same researchers found a decrease in the

number of students believing they would need remedial assistance (i.e. English, nearly 12%; reading, 5%; mathematics, 21%; social studies, 3%; science, 9%; and foreign language, nearly 9%). Less than 2% of the freshmen expected to either fail a course or dropout temporarily and less than 1% expected to dropout permanently. While optimism and idealism is to be encouraged, even in light of actual skill levels, the harsh realities of college attrition can not be overlooked.

With the change in the student population and the subsequent drop in academic levels there has been also a change in student attitudes and a rise in expectations. Students are viewed as being oriented toward a career, concerned with themselves and motivated toward career success. Levine (1980) notes that there has been a notable rise in the proportion of students seeking professional degrees. Two out of three freshmen in the class of 1979 were planning careers in the professions and one out of five wants to enter medicine or law. Recent figures released by the National Center for Education Statistics and reported in the Chronicle of Higher Education (Fact File, 1981) demonstrate that the current high school seniors are planning to follow the same paths as their recent predecessors. In all cases these fields of study require the most rigorous levels of scholarship and highest degree of academic achievement. It is evident that many students will not be able to meet their goals and many will fall by the wayside unless assistance is provided by student support services such as learning skills centers and developmental education programs, or by the traditional academic units.

While the former are usually staffed by educators whom take a benevolent view towards the current problems, the latter is comprised of faculty members who because of training or personal success in higher education may not hold the same views. What then are the attitudes held by faculty members about the basic skills levels of undergraduate students? The following section presents a summary of a study in which this and other related questions were investigated at a large research university.

Attitudes and Opinions About the Basic Skills Levels of Students Enrolled at the University of Pittsburgh. Given the fact that there are numerous claims in the literature that the basic skills levels of today's undergraduate students are lower than those of their respective cohorts from years past, and also since institutions of higher education have for a number of social, political and economic reasons opened the gates of higher learning to a greater number of nontraditional students, there is a need to assess how faculty members respond to the changes thrust upon them.

Recently, a team of researchers at the University of Pittsburgh (Sartain, Nossen, Bond, Stahl, Haynes & Stein, Note 2) surveyed a stratified sample of 475 faculty members from the institution and its branch campuses to determine their attitudes and opinions regarding the basic academic skills levels of undergraduates. A total of 162 questionnaires were complete enough to be tabulated and analyzed. A summary of these findings are now detailed.

Over 60% of the respondents felt that during the past ten

years student competency levels with the basic skills had decreased with the greatest losses being in the language arts (writing, 62.6% felt there was a decrease; spelling, 55.2% felt there was a decrease; and reading, 51% felt there was a decrease). The respondents noted that their opinions were based on personal observations (77.6%) as well as on discussions with professionals from the same discipline (59.2%) and professionals from outside their discipline (36.4%). Influences which were mentioned to a lesser degree included:(1) personal experience with a public school system (21.6%), (2) personal reading in the popular press (19.8%), (3) professional reading in journals, etc. (17.3%), and (4) viewing reports on television (11.1%).

Approximately 53% of the respondents believe that the reason for the skills decline could be blamed on poor high school preparation, while nearly 30% noted that there was a lessened emphasis on the value of basic skills mastery by modern society. As might be expected, a number of the respondents believe that an overindulgence in television viewing by young people adversely influences their competency with the basic skills (20.4%).

Slightly more than 74% of the faculty members felt that institutions of higher education should provide corrective services to improve students' skills, while only 16% felt that students not possessing the prerequisite skills should be excluded from higher education. More than a third of the "positive" respondents stated that all colleges and universities should provide basic skills services, and smaller percentages felt that services should be limited to

special admissions programs or to community colleges. A majority of the respondents (58%) opposed the granting of credit for corrective courses, while 42% were in favor.

When most of the respondents (62.3%) encounter a student deficient in the basic skills, they refer him or her to a learning assistance program such as a Learning Skills Center or a Writing Workshop. Another common response (47.5%) to this situation is to recommend that the student enroll in a basic skills course. Yet, only a minority (13.6%) of the respondents stated that they follow-up their recommendations by contacting the student's advisor. About one-fourth of the faculty members mentioned that they perform some form of individualized tutoring; however, the extent of these activities is dependent upon the subject material, the time requirements and the severity of the problem. In contrast, about one-fifth prefer simply adopt a "sink-or-swim" attitude by which a student discovers that he is attempting to perform beyond his ability. Approximately 14% of the respondents simply overlook a student's basic skills deficiency as long as the subject matter is mastered.

In response to the perceived decline in basic skills more than 40% of the respondents have increased the amount of discussion and questioning in their classes, and a fourth have increased their use of audio-visual devices. Nearly a quarter of the respondents have lowered the level of their course requirements to meet the achievement levels of the entering undergraduate students. Other common practices include: (1) assigning supplementary class materials

written at a simpler level (21.6%), (2) assigning major class texts written at a simpler level (21.6%), and (3) reducing the number of written assignments (21%).

More than half of the respondents are interested in finding textbooks that incorporate learning aids with regular class content, and the majority favor using a discipline specific study skills text to teach advanced reading, writing and study skills required for mastery of the content of their field.

The respondents were asked whether the institution upon accepting tuition has a moral or contractual obligation to provide educational experiences at a student's level of competency. A majority of the respondents (76.1%) believe that the student is primarily responsible for his or her own success and thus is promised only an opportunity to learn as much as possible by utilizing the faculty and all the other resources of the university. Only a minority felt that a moral obligation existed (06%) or a contractual agreement (06.7%) existed.

If the University were to offer an in-service education program to help faculty in working effectively with students demonstrating inadequate basic skills, slightly over half (51.4%) of the respondents would be willing to participate. The types of in-service programs generating the greatest interest included: (1) formal mini-courses, (2) a symposium, (3) cooperative departmental curriculum development activities, and (4) informal workshops.

In summary, it is apparent that faculty members continue to

be very much concerned about the skills levels demonstrated by the undergraduate students enrolled at Pitt. It might be postulated that the concern is based upon the respondents' desire to stay out of what they perceive to be the remedial aspects of education; however, it is noted that they are willing to undergo in-service training and also utilize supplementary techniques and materials designed to assist the learning process.

Thoughts for the Future. Now that postsecondary institutions, save the most prestigious, are facing a current or an expected decline in the number of applicants and or entrants, the very survival of many colleges may indeed depend in part on reducing the number of withdrawals from a growing population of students who are at risk because they possess limited competencies with the basic skills. While part of the task of assisting this student group will be directed towards developmental education programs, it is apparent that both junior faculty and teaching assistants, who usually teach freshmen and sophomores, and also senior faculty will become more directly involved with helping students master various levels of the basic skills. Furthermore, one can predict that this task could lead to closer working relations between the secondary schools and the academic programs of institutions of higher education. Clearly the need is evident.

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